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THE DRAMATIC UNITIES IN ENGLAND.

(Continued.)

It is needless, for the purpose of this paper, to give more than a brief summary of the involved and at times acrimonious dispute over the unities in France. The question has been studied in its various phases, though not, so far as I am aware, by one scholar in its completeness.¹ From the very first, French dramatists and French theorists fell ready victims to the neo-classic influence in this, as in other matters. They were armed with no national traditions to render them proof against foreign literary encroachment and conquest,—and Italian thought soon held almost undisputed sway in France. “The Pléiade made closer and closer approximations to the absolute Trinity of Unities”,² and this tendency was gradual until it triumphed in the rigor of Chapelain and the Academy. As Dannheisser puts it, “Ihre (the French dramatists’) Muse machte die Bekanntschaft der Regeln und diese werden schliesslich, wie *Tartuffe*, dem Herrn des Hauses die Thüre weisen.”³

On the other hand, the note of opposition was by no means faint, even from the very start,⁴—and the chorus of the dissentient was strengthened in time. Hardy, Scudéry, Balzac, Ogier, and many another are more or less outspoken against strict construction of the rules. The first—a dramatist chiefly—says, “mais de vouloir restreindre une Tragédie dans les bornes d’une Ode ou d’une Elegie, cela ne se peut ny ne se doit.”⁵

¹Vd. Dannheisser, Hunger, Kuhr, Vial et Denise,—in Bibliography.

²Saintsbury, *Hist. of Crit.* vol. 2, p. 127.

³*Op. cit.* p. 23.

⁴Cf. Jean de Beaubreuil, and De Laudun, (Vd. Spingarn, *Hist. etc.*, Section on Unities in France.)

⁵*Théâtre*, V. III, Au Lecteur.

Scudéry speaks of "ces bornes trop estroites",⁶ and Ogier, with the nearest approach to the independence of de Laudun, or of Ricci among the Italians, proves, from the practice of the ancients, that "les plus excellents maistres due mestier n'ont pas toujours observé ceste reigle, que nos critiques veulent nous faire garder si religieusement a ceste heure." The "reigle" he is speaking of is the unity of time, which for him is "entre deux soleils".⁷

In reading the opinions of these critics and dramatists, one is struck by the noteworthy fact that not a single man of them is willing to go the full gamut of opposition. A certain air of hesitancy, of readiness to hedge and compromise, is in evidence everywhere in their theorizing. The fact is that the French drama was linked to the Italian with too many and too close bonds; and innovation was not to be thought of. From the time of Jean de la Taille's first formulation of the rules (1572) to the year 1630, the Italian tradition was strengthening its influence on French soil, and in the latter year it became paramount. Thus, 1630 was the date when the unities are recognized as hard and fast rules of the French stage. Nor was the tide to be stemmed by casual voices of remonstrance, like that of Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, who, in *Les Visionnaires*, attacked the rules with wit and adroitness.⁸

Just as Jean de la Taille was the first in France to formulate the rules, so Chapelain was the first to bind them into a code, and with the aid of Richelieu and his Academy, to make them gospel. It would be a needless digression to enter here into the particulars of the "Cid-strife", which led to the unbending attitude of the Academy on the question. Corneille, the chief dramatic figure of the day, was forced to

⁶ *Ligdamon et Lidias* (1631).

⁷ *Préface à Tyre et Sidon* de Jean de Schelandre—1628.

⁸ E. g.,—"Si l'on void qu'un sujet se passe en plus d'un jour,
L'Autheur, dit on alors, m'a fait un mauvais tour;
Il m'a fait sans dormir passer des nuits entieres
Excusez le pauvre homme, il a trop de matieres."

kiss the rod of authority, in penitence for a latitude which Richelieu feared would tend to undermine the Academy's autocracy. Corneille's recantation made, the French stage was henceforth to be in the grip of the Unities;—no further heresy was tolerated, nor indeed attempted,—so that to the end of the 17th century, French critics,—Boileau, Dacier, D'Aubignac, LeBossu, Rapin,—do nothing more than re-mince the "mincings" of their fore-runners, both native and Italian.

It is well to sum up at this stage, the contribution of French speculation on our subject. To begin with, the French theorists, with their genius for codification, worked out the corollaries that follow from rigid enforcement of the minor unities—the *liaison* of acts and of scenes. In his third *Discours*, Corneille expressed his desire for "the exact adjustment of all parts of a tragedy", and deduces the two *liaisons*. As early a playwright as Hardy,—by no means a rigorous conformist—had announced a preference for a certain kind of *liaison*. He says, "J'approuve fort une grande douceur au vers, une liaison sans jours." With Corneille, *liaison* is, at first, not a rule of the stage; he affirms this in saying that "liaison que unit toutes les actions particulieres de chaque acte l'une avec l'autre est un grand ornement dans un poème",¹⁰ and this after having conformed to it for a generation and more. The fact is important, for we find in Corneille's discussion the source of the *liaison des scènes* of Dryden and other English critics.

Another topic that merits attention is the French treatment of the vexed question of verisimilitude. Here again the theorists—like their English imitators—invoke the aid of rational precision and "common-sense". D'Aubignac is naively dogmatic on this point: "Les règles du théâtre ne sont pas fondées en autorité, mais en raison. Elles ne sont pas établies sur l'exemple, mais sur le jugement naturel",¹¹—and

¹⁰ *Théâtre*, vol. 3, *idem*.

¹⁰ Dryden and others in England class *liaison* with the "mechanic graces" of a play.

¹¹ *Pratique*, II, 4.

these views are the direct outcome of the reasoning of Chapelain. The latter, in his *Sentiments de l'Académie sur le Cid* (1638) delivers himself of the following weighty considerations: "The beauty of a drama is measured, not by the pleasure it gives, but by its conformity to the rules. If an irregular play, full of disorder and confusion, has any elements of pleasure in it, they are due to whatever regularity the author has included. If on the other hand, some regular dramas give little satisfaction, 'il ne faut pas croire que ce soit la faute des règles, mais bien celle des auteurs, dont le sterile genie n'a pû fournir a l'art matière qui fust assez riche.'"¹²

Having taken this as his unshakeable axiom, Chapelain is ready to go to any length in establishing the rules. Indeed, he says, "The essential rule of the theatre is *la vraisemblance*, and not *le vrai*,—which latter cannot be *vraisemblable*."¹³ And again, "The rule of the three unities is necessary for the production of *vraisemblance*." In keeping with this narrow spirit—already familiar to us in Italian theorizing—Mairet, in his "Preface de *Silvanir*" (1631), argues for the unity of twenty-four hours. On the unity of place his comments are something like those of Sidney:—"Il est impossible que l'imagination ne se refroidisse, et qu'une si soudaine mutation de scène ne la suprenne et ne la dégoute extrêmement, s'il faut qu'elle coure toujours après son objet de province en province, et que presqu'en un moment elle passe les monts et traverse les mers avec luy."¹⁴

¹² Compare the almost verbatim agreement with this, of the coterie of Rymer, Dennis, Jeremy Collier, *et al.* Against the views of Chapelain, Ragan inveighs in a letter to Menage, 17 octobre, 1654, (quoted Vial et Denise, p. 106 note).

¹³ *Lettre sur l'art dramatique*, 1630.

¹⁴ Boileau (*L'Art Poet.* III, 45 ff.) cries out against this misuse of the imagination, in words that Soame has well rendered:

"Your place of action must be fixed, and rest.

A Spanish poet may with good event

In one day's space whole ages represent;

There oft the hero of the wandering stage

Begins the child and ends the play of age....."

Such are the shackling views that led the really logical mind of Corneille into the absurdities of fine-spun reasoning. With true dramatic instinct he realized, and even made bold to say at first, that the unities do not conserve *vraisemblance*. But the evil genius of the day made it impossible for him to maintain a consistently independent attitude, and led him to make concessions that proved fatal. He seeks to justify the law of time by a wrenching of the Aristotelian "imitation". As tragedy, he says, imitates human life, it is necessary that the representation of life it gives should last exactly as long as the actual incidents in real life would last. This is imitation in a lifeless, literal sense. How impossible it is to follow the rule rigorously is evident enough to Corneille, though he dodges the issue quite skilfully. The *Discours* will always stand as an instance of genius sadly misdirected.

Yet another feature of the French treatment of the unities is that the unity of action comes again into its own—and with a vengeance. The tendency culminates in the definitions and explanations of Corneille. He says, for instance, "L'unité d'action consiste dans la comédie, en l'unité d'intrigue ou d'obstacle aux desseins des principaux acteurs, et en l'unité de péril dans la tragédie." But he is not opposed to having several "dangers" in tragedy, nor more than one intrigue in comedy, providing they are well articulated. Corneille is most rigorous with regard to the major unity,—and the majority of his *Examens* are taken up with it. It was not long before the actions of French plays were reduced to slender, attenuate threads.

The French critics, as is seen, inherit the mantle of Italian theorizing, and wear it with graceful attitudinizings of

One Spanish playwright who is in essential disagreement with Boileau is Tirso de Molina. In *Cigarrales de Toledo* he includes a play of his own, *El Vergonzoso en Palacio*, where one of the characters says—"How can a gallant fall in love with a lady, court her, treat her, win her and marry her, all in a day?"

(Vd. *Bulletin Hispanique*, 1901-2, Ed. M. Morel-Fatio. Quoted from Saintsbury's *Loci Critici*.)

their own. Imagination,—the free swing of fancy—is a dead letter to them, a thing undreamt of. The reign of reason is supreme. It remains for us to see how the English drama fell under this benumbing spell. It is going too far, however, to ridicule without reserve, the attitude of the French theorists. Unsparing condemnation of this sort is often prompted by lack of sympathy—national or other. Therefore, it is well to remember that we must view as expressions of national tendencies both the French Academy and the opinions it has moulded,—and that to these belongs the credit of what is most valuable in French literature, notably the fine flavor and the sparkling clearness of the language. If, then, French teaching was not a happy force in the English drama at a time when that drama had but few, if any, inherent elements of greatness,—how noble was the atonement of this same teaching in helping to create, at last, English prose—lucid, racy, and strong. Such is the prose of Dryden, the central figure of our second period. At this day, when Dryden is perhaps coming to his own as a literary critic, may we not speculate upon how far his perfect medium of expression aided him in attaining, every now and then, the ring of modernness so peculiar to him?

Dryden's pronouncements on the unities are the largest in bulk of any English critic. Unfortunately, however, here, as in so many other things, Dryden does not maintain a consistent policy or set of ideas, nor can we trace in him the slow growth of the hardening classicism that is evident in Jonson. On the other hand, he is akin to Jonson in seizing every opportunity for giving utterance to critical thought. Prolegomena to plays, prologues and epilogues, defenses, essays—all were vehicles for the thought of an eminently critical and fundamentally logical mind.

It will best serve the purpose of this study to take up Dryden's views in chronological order. In this connection the interesting paper by Mr. Wm. E. Bohn, on *Dryden's Literary Criticism*¹⁵ may be used as a check. Mr. Bohn divides Dry-

¹⁵ *Modern Lang. Ass'n, Pub.*, 1907, no. 3.

den's life and critical activity into five periods: of alternate independence and classic "rationalism". As Dryden had not turned his attention to the unities during the first of these periods, we can begin with the second, which Mr. Bohn dates from 1666 to 1675. Within these time limits,—when Dryden was "the favorite of the court", and "a court critic"—falls the major portion of his exposition of the unities.

The earliest reference, somewhat indirect, that I have noted occurs in the Dedication to the *Indian Emperor* (1667).¹⁸ Dryden shows he is aware of the rules and of French example, when he says, "It (the play) is an irregular piece, if compared with many of Corneille's". The next year, 1668, (the "unities" year, *par excellence*) Dryden has become a conformist,—though with a certain doubt and reservation which he is never at pains to suppress. Both these facts are apparent in the first Prologue to the *Maiden Queen* (1668):¹⁹

I.

"He who writ this, not without pains and thought,
From French and English theatres has brought
The exactest rules, by which a play is wrought.

II.

The unities of action, place and time;
The scenes unbroken;²⁰ and a mingled chime
Of Jonson's humour, with Corneille's rhyme.

III.

But while dead colours he with care did lay,
He fears his wit, or plot, he did not weigh,
Which are the living beauties of a play.

¹⁸*Works* ed. Scott-Saintsbury, vol. 2, p. 282.

¹⁹*idem*, p. 422.

²⁰*Cf.* Shadwell, *infra*, on "scenes unbroken".

The same fear is expressed in the Preface to the work,"—"For what else concerns this play, I would tell the reader that it is regular, according to the strictest of dramatic laws; but that is a commendation which many of our poets now despise, and a beauty which our common audiences do not easily discern. Neither indeed do I value myself upon it; because, with all that symmetry of parts, it may want an air and spirit (which consists in the writing) to set it off."

This saving sense of the "air and spirit" characterizes all of Dryden's critical utterances. In his most rigorous moments he is still at bottom aware of something that transcends the rules. He is never a classicist in the grain.

We now come to the justly famous *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668). It is written as a friendly argument among four gentlemen: Crites (Sir Robt. Howard), Neander (Dryden), Lisideius (Sir Chas. Sedley) and Eugenius (Lord Buckhurst). Of the views credited to these men in the *Essay*, it is impossible to speak at length; all that can be attempted here is a summary.

The case for regularity is opened by Crites who (against the real opinion of Sir Robt. Howard) is made to plead for the superiority of the ancients over the moderns and of the French drama over the English. In this he is ably seconded by Lisideius,—so that we get from the two a clear statement of contemporary French theories. Partly unlike Sidney, who, it will be remembered, bases the rules on Aristotle's precept and the practice of Italian "player", Crites finds them "extracted" by the French from Aristotle and "Horace". The compass of time he would make the natural day of twenty-four hours, "or as near it as it can be contrived". In supporting this view he harks back to the old theory of "verisimilitude":—"The time", says he, "of the feigned action or fable of the play, should be proportioned as near as can be to the duration of that time in which it is represented: since, therefore, all plays are acted on the theatre in the space of time much within the compass of

idem, p. 418. Cf., also, the Epilogue to the play.

twenty-four hours, that play is to be thought the nearest imitation of nature, whose plot or action is confined within that time." Crites would have, too, the parts of a play "equally subdivided", so that each act may take up a like part of the imagined time. He is well aware of the practice of the ancients as to "the rule of time", and his account of this phase of the Greek drama is finely vivid:—"(The Ancients) set the audience, as it were, at the post where the race is to be concluded; and, saving them the tedious expectation of seeing the poet set out and ride the beginning of the course, they suffer you not to behold him till he is in sight of the goal and just upon you." Toward the unity of place, his attitude is profoundly orthodox. "I will not deny," he says "but, by the variation of painted scenes, the fancy.....may sometimes imagine it several places, with some appearance of probability; yet it still carries the greater likelihood of truth, if those places be supposed so near each other, as in the same town or city, etc....."

One possessed of this high regard for symmetry, may be expected to delight in *liaison des scènes*, and indeed Crites praises the "mechanic grace", as "a good mark of a well-contrived play, when all the persons are known to each other, and every one of them has some affairs with all the rest." Of the unity of action Crites accepts the Greek conception,—everything, "even the obstacles, are to be subservient to it". Double action is an abomination,—"not but that there may be many actions in a play, as Ben Jonson has observed in his 'Discoveries'"; but they must all be true and subordinate underplots. Then as a parting shot he hurls against typically English plays the well-worn charge that, "That which should be the business of a day, takes up in some of them an age; instead of one action, they are the epitomes of a man's life; and for one spot of ground, which the stage should represent, we are sometimes in more countries than the map can show us." Here he may be said to rest his case.

Eugenius takes up the cudgels for the native theatre. He begins by refuting the argument of the authority of the ancients, alleging that "the plots of their plays being narrow, and the persons few, one of their acts was written in less compass than one of our well-wrought scenes". His general views seem to have been those of Dryden who says, "Eugenius, who seemed to have the better of the argument, would urge no farther."²⁰ Lisideius, while decrying French over-scrupulosity with regard to time, expresses pleasure at their *liaison*, thus allying himself with Crites. The other side is nobly upheld by Neander,—and who does not hear the clear voice of Dryden ringing in the following words: "And this leads me to wonder why Lisideius and many others should cry up the bareness of the French plots, above the variety and copiousness of the English"? A most telling blow is delivered when Neander says, "They (the French) have brought on themselves that dearth of plot, and narrowness of imagination, which may be observed in all their plays. How many beautiful accidents might naturally happen in two or three days, which cannot arrive with any probability in the compass of twenty-four hours?....."

Dryden, then, is by no means, in his theories, a hide-bound follower of the "French" rules. That doubt which he hinted at in his first utterance on the question is here openly declared and defended. To this view he held firm throughout his life, though it must be said, in support of Mr. Bohn's opinions, that there is too often, as in the case under discussion, a wide disparity between Dryden's practice and his criticism. In this, as in the general trend of his thought on the drama, the analogy between him and Corneille is of the closest. Mr. Ker states the case happily²¹ in saying, "Dryden's position in criticism is very like that of his two forerunners, Tasso and Corneille, both of whom felt themselves obliged on the one hand to pay reverence to the Ancients, and on the other hand

²⁰ p. 38 (edition of Wm. Strunk, Jr.).

²¹ Vol. I, p. xix, *Essays of John Dryden*.

to consider their own genius and the claims of contemporary fashion."

The same year that gave to the world the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* saw the culmination of the so-called Howard controversy. This little dispute between Sir Robt. Howard and Dryden dated from 1664, when, in the Dedication to *The Rival Ladies*, Dryden advanced a plea for rhyme in plays. With this view Howard disagreed in the Preface to his *Plays* (1665). There was little, if any, animosity between the two at this time as they were actually collaborating on a comedy acted the same year. Dryden's reply—the *Essay* we have just discussed—appeared three years later. By this time the ground of dispute had broadened out and included other questions besides that of rhyme. Howard's retort appeared almost immediately after the *Essay*, in the form of a Preface to the *Great Favourite, or The Duke of Lerma* (1668). On the doctrine of the unities Howard's statement in this Preface is perfectly clear-minded. He says, "To show therefore upon what ill grounds they dictate Lawes for 'Dramatick Poesie' I shall endeavor to make it evident that there is no such thing as what they all pretend; for, if strictly and duely weigh'd, 'tis as impossible for one stage to present two Houses or two Roomes truly, as two Countreys or Kingdomes; and as impossible that five houres should be two houres and a halfe, as that a thousand houres or yeares should be less than what they are;" etc. Nevertheless, Howard is not dogmatic on the matter. His readiness to leave it to the author's discretion is admirably cool-headed. "I would," says he, "have all attempts of this nature be submitted to the fancy of others, and bear the name of Propositions, not of Confident Lawes, or Rules made by Demonstration; and then I shall not discommend any Poet that dresses his play in such a fashion as his fancy best approves; and fairly leave it for others to follow, if it appears to them most convenient, and fullest of ornament."²²

²² Yet, as Professor Spingarn points out (*Crit. Essays*, vol. 2, note to p. 108), "Howard finds fault with the laxity of the Spaniards."

But the two playwrights were not to have their quarrel entirely to themselves. In the Preface to the *Sullen Lovers* (1668) Thomas Shadwell is obviously taking his stand on a mooted question.²³ As a professed disciple of Jonson,²⁴ Shadwell is committed to regularity, and his Preface dispels all doubts on the point:—

“I have in this play, as near as I could, observed the three Unities of Time, Place and Action; the time of the Drama does not exceed six hours, the place is a very narrow compass, and the Main Action of the Play, upon which all the rest depend, is the Sullen Love betwixt *Stanford* and *Emelia*, which kind of love is only proper to their Characters. I have here, as often as I could naturally, kept the scenes unbroken, which (though it be not so much practiced, or so well understood, by the English) yet among the French Poets is accounted a great Beauty.”²⁵

Further on in the Preface, however, Shadwell admits frankly and fully, the difficulty of observing the unities in their straitest sense: “Nor can you expect,” says he, “a very Correct Play, under a Year’s pain at the least, from the Wittiest Man of the Nation; it is so difficult to write well in this kind.”

Perhaps the most striking feature of the controversy thus far is that, in essentials, the opinions of the three dramatists coincide;—they are all liberal in their views, though Howard is perhaps the most so,—and one wonders at this much ado

²³ “In his first Comedy Shadwell had caricatured Howard as the positive knight, and in the ‘Preface’ had attacked Dryden’s ‘Essay on Dramatic Poesy’”—Ward, *Hist.*, etc. vol. 3, p. 356, note 3.

²⁴ Cf. The Prologue to his *Squire of Alsatia*,

“Pray let a Comedy once more be grac’d:

Which does not Monsters represent but men,

Conforming to the rules of Master Ben.”

Ben, as we have noted, was still flourishing in his “mastership.”

²⁵ Yet, Shadwell says in the Prologue to his *Libertine*, that it is “the most irregular Play upon the Stage.”

about nothing. Nor is their attitude unlike that of Corneille when he makes bold to declare the views closest to his heart.

The only other document in the controversy—for the chief disputants were soon after reconciled—is Dryden's *Defense of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy*.²⁸ This work, while by no means acrimonious, is more direct than the others in its statements,—as Dryden later realized with regret. In effect, the *Defense* is a re-statement of the critic's position as already elaborated in the *Essay*—even to the quoting of some of his earlier *dicta*. In the heat of refutation, Dryden is impelled to go further than perhaps he would otherwise have gone. He is ready to grant Howard's contention that the stage cannot be two places,—“yet the stage may properly represent them, successively, or at several times,..... We distinguish place, as it relates to plays, into real and imaginary. The real place is that theatre, or piece of ground, on which the play is acted. The imaginary, that house, town, or country where the action of the drama is supposed to be.” This leads our theorist directly to the question of the imagination. “The imagination of the audience, aided by the words of the poet and painted scenes, may *suppose* the stage to be sometimes one place, sometimes another.” Dryden then goes on—with too servile following of the French—to hem in this imagination most wofully. It is to be dutiful, and accommodate its pace to that of the more sober reason. “Reason, therefore, can sooner be led by imagination to step from one room into another, than to walk to two distant houses, and yet rather go thither, than to fly like a witch through the air, and be hurried from one region to another. Fancy and reason go hand in hand; the first cannot leave the last behind; and though fancy, when it sees the wide gulf, would venture over as the nimbler, yet it is withheld by reason, which will refuse to take the leap, when the distance before it appears too large.”

In his summary, Dryden points out the underlying difference between tragedy and comedy with regard to the time

²⁸ Prefixed to the second edition of the *Indian Emperor* (1668).

unity. He here expresses what Jonson must have realized more than once, and as a matter of fact, he justifies the contrast by appealing to the practice of the earlier dramatist. Says Dryden, "In comedy I would not exceed twenty-four hours or thirty hours; for the plot, accidents, and persons of comedy are small and may be naturally turned into a little compass: but in tragedy the design is weighty, and the persons great; therefore there will naturally be required a greater space of time in which to move them."²⁷

This completes Dryden's "second period". His main contributions to dramatic criticism belong to this time. Henceforth his ideas on play-making are to appear as occasional utterances only, and he is to show a leaning to one side or the other as circumstances, and the play in hand, compel. This latter is so evident that it becomes practically impossible to divide his critical tenets, considered from the standpoint of the unities, into hard and fast "periods".

The criticism we have reviewed reveals Dryden in the attitude of a compromiser, an opportunist. He unites in himself the ancient tradition as modified by contemporary French theorizing, with the characteristic independence of the Englishman. The unity of time he views with more than the laxity of Corneille, yet he asserts its desirability for comedy. On place he is narrower and more dogmatic, and unfortunately falls under the spell of the fine-spun speculation of French sophists. As regards the unity of action, Dryden is his true self again. He recoils from the "thin, abstract plots" of one rather common variety of French comedy, and declares in favor of the fuller, more robust, and more rounded plays of the English. Nor is he prepared to shudder at plentiful episodes and

²⁷Cf. Preface to *Tyrannic Love*, 1670. (*Wks.* ed. Scott-Saintsbury, vol. iii, p. 379): "The scenes are everywhere unbroken, and the unities of place and time more exactly kept, than perhaps is required in a tragedy, or at least, than I have since preserved them in 'The Conquest of Granada.'"

well-hinged sub-plots.²⁸ Thus his dramatic tenets are a subtle combination of the "classic" and the "romantic",—which perhaps accounts for some of the charges of inconsistency so frequently leveled against him. It must be said that neither he nor any of his contemporaries was able to see the slightest incongruity in this admixture. It was the common heritage of the time.²⁹ Yet the note of modernness that I claimed for Dryden is nowhere so apparent as at this period. To him it was given—and to few others of his time—to atone for errors by true critical appreciation, which is only another word for insight. When he says, "The French have brought on themselves that dearth of plot, and narrowness of imagination, which may be observed in all their plays. How many beautiful accidents might naturally happen in two or three days, which cannot arrive with any probability in the compass of twenty-four hours?"³⁰ he soars high above the Rymers and Colliers of the age. Who can doubt that it was the influence of views such as these, that led St. Evremond to express his consciousness of the same fact?—"Il faut aimer la règle pour éviter la confusion; il faut aimer le bon sens qui modere l'ardeur d'une imagination allumée; mais il faut ôter à la règle toute contrainte qui gesne, et bannir une raison scrupuleuse qui, par un trop grand attachement à la justesse, ne laisse pas rien de libre et de naturel."³¹

²⁸ Cf. what he says in the Dedication of the 3rd part of his *Poetical Miscellanies* (1693): "As little can I grant that the French dramatick writers excel the English—they content themselves with a thin design without esipodes, and managed by few persons; our audience will not be pleased but with variety of accidents, and underplot, and many actors. They follow the ancients too servilely in the mechanic rules; and we assume too much license to ourselves in keeping them only in view, at too great distance."—(*Miscel. Wks.* ed. Malone. 1800, vol. 3, p. 278). With the above should be compared the words of St. Evremond, *De la Comedie Angloise* (*Oeuvres Meslees*, 1689, p. 577).

²⁹ Cf. Ker (*op. cit.* p. xxxviii, vol I).

³⁰ p. 61, ed. Strunk.

³¹ *idem*, p. 577.

The remaining *loci* in Dryden can be considered briefly. The first comes in the Preface (1678) to *All for Love*. In the interim Dryden had formed the friendship of Rymer (who, in spite of his critical opinions may have been a very estimable gentleman) and, in addition, had become subject to the influence of Rapin and Bossu. This prepares us for a period of relative narrowness in criticism, and such was the case, at least with regard to the unities. He says, "The fabric of the play is regular enough,—and the Unities of Time, Place, and Action, more exactly observed, than perhaps the English theatre requires. Particularly the action is so much one that it is the only of the kind without episode or underplot."²² But he will not forego the cherished principle of the English latitude of action,—“Yet though their models (of the ancients) are regular, they are too little for English tragedy; which requires to be built in a larger compass.”²³

In the same year was written the *Heads of an Answer to Rymer's remarks on the 'Tragedies of the Last Age'*. Here again he applauds the English freedom of plot.²⁴ In a somewhat narrower vein he speaks in the *Grounds of Criticism*, prefixed to *Troilus and Cressida* (1679). The action must be one, for a double action distracts the attention of the audience. So that, at the end of Mr. Bohn's third period (which he calls one of critical independence) we find Dryden imbued with classical ideas of the unities, and hearkening, in this, most readily to authority.

Dryden next touches upon the rules in the Preface to *The Spanish Friar* (1681).²⁵ In this he avows wilful disobedience to the “ancient” canons: “There are evidently two actions [in the play]; but it will be clear to any judicious man, that with

²²Ker, Vol. 1, p. 92.

²³*idem*, p. 200.

²⁴Vol. xv, p. 388, (*Wks.* ed. Scott-Saintsbury).

²⁵This is in Mr. Bohn's fourth period (1680-1689), truly one of “meagre criticism” and a time when our poet is, in general, “coldly rationalistic”.

half the pains I could have raised a play from either of them; for this time I satisfied my humour, which was to tack two plays together; and to break a rule for the pleasure of variety."³²

The year 1689 begins, according to Mr. Bohn, the final phase,—one of "moral and intellectual independence." In general this is strikingly true of Dryden's criticism during this period, though in his practice, as always, he is an opportunist, forced to compromise with the demands of his audience on the one hand, and of the critics on the other. The Preface to *Don Sebastian* (1690) shows the ascendancy of the popular will. "I must," says Dryden, "declare freely that I have not exactly kept to the three mechanic rules of unity. I knew them, and had them in my eye, but followed them only at a distance; for the genius of the English cannot bear too regular a play: we are given to variety, even to a debauchery of pleasure.....I have taken the time of two days, because.....to gain a greater beauty it is lawful for a poet to supercede a less."³³ Similarly, in the Preface to *Cleomenes*, Dryden says, excusing a breach of the rule of time, "it is better to trespass on a rule, than leave out a beauty."³⁴ Yet again, in the Preface to the 2nd part of his *Poetical Miscellanies* (1693) the thought is thus reiterated: "For many a fair precept in Poetry is like a seeming demonstration in mathematickes; very specious in the diagram, but failing in the mechanick operations."³⁵

The same spirit has the upper hand in the Dedication to Dryden's last play, *Love Triumphant* (1694). Of the rule of time in the drama he says, "that it is much within the compass of an astrological day." For place he has less, though little less regard. "Some of the late French poets, and,

³²*IVks., idem*, vol. vi. p. 409.

³³*Works, idem*, Vol. vii, p. 313.

³⁴*Idem*, vol. viii, p. 220.

³⁵*Crit. & Misc. Works*, ed. Malone 1800, p. 26. Cf. p. 27, "sometimes [I have] very boldly made such expositions of my authors as no Dutch commentator will forgive me". Another mention of the Dutch occurs on p. 46.

amongst the English my most ingenious friend, Mr. Congreve, have observed this rule strictly. . . I have followed the example of Corneille, and stretched the latitude to a street and palace, not far distant from each other in the same city. They, who will not allow this liberty to a poet, make it a very ridiculous thing for an audience to suppose themselves sometimes to be in a field, sometimes in a garden, and at other times in a chamber. There are not, indeed, so many absurdities in their supposition as in ours; but it is an original absurdity for the audience to suppose themselves to be in any other place than in the very theatre in which they sit, which is neither chamber, nor garden, nor yet a public place of any business, but that of the representation."⁴⁰ The importance of this statement cannot be overestimated. In a flash of intuition, but without following it up, Dryden had hit upon one underlying "absurdity" of all Italian and French and English defenders of verisimilitude. I refer to the merging of audience and actors,—to the projection of the spectators upon the stage, as if they were part and parcel of the performance before them, or held to it the relation of the Greek Chorus. This confounding of two separate and distinct bodies—and its origin is not far to seek—joined to a false notion of imitation, gave rise to the *vraisemblance* that was so highly extolled and so eagerly pursued. To repeat what Dryden says,—“they make it a very ridiculous thing for *an audience to suppose themselves sometimes to be in a field*” etc. Our financial commentators failed to see that the *actors* were “sometimes to be in a field,” and not the audience,—that the spectators are entitled to a certain subtle aloofness from the action on the stage, or there can be no “purgation” of pity and fear. And so the critics, with this spectre of their own conjuring ever present on the boards, cried out to the dramatist to keep it rooted to the spot. Such was the curious blending of actor and auditor—not a surprising result when one remembers that some actors have held that they must always face their audience, and address it solely.

⁴⁰*Wks.*—ed. Scott-Saintsbury, vol. viii, p. 375.

It will hardly be needful, after what has already been said, to make an extended summary of Dryden's position. The curious strife between his theory and practice has been sufficiently dwelt upon. As Mr. Ker sums it up, "Dryden's theory is wholly independent of his practice, with the possible exception of his heroic plays."⁴¹ Here, as in other matters, Dryden was an opportunist. This fact militates at times against the probity of his criticism,—but it does not prevent his being rated a sound thinker, though one with a lamentable proneness to bow the knee. With him it is a case of the critics *versus* the audience,—yet his own native good taste often frees him from the trammels of both.

Among his English predecessors Dryden owed most to Jonson. The latter's vogue was still to be reckoned with in the second half of the 17th century, and his "mastership" was still attested by numerous dramatists. As regards foreign influence upon Dryden, that of the French is paramount. From Corneille he received the original impulse to critical thought, and "a quickening of interest in critical discussion."⁴² But his indebtedness embraces other French writers as well, and he often mirrors the views of Rapin or Bossu, and yet others. More conjectural is his knowledge of D'Aubignac and La Mesnardière.⁴³ It can safely be said, however, that Dryden's criticism derives preponderatingly from French sources. From the Italians he gets far less, yet something too from them,—perhaps chiefly through French channels. Other sources are inferential and less positive. With the Dutch he is at least acquainted, and, in addition, strong Spanish influence has been claimed for him by Bolingbroke,⁴⁴ though if the latter case were true, Dryden would inevitably have reflected, more certainly than he does, the Spanish desire for liberty in the drama.

⁴¹Vol. i, p. xi.

⁴²*idem*, p. xix.

⁴³*Vd.* Ker and Strunk on this point.

⁴⁴*Vd.* Spence: *Anecdotes*, etc., 1820, p. 106. Cited by Ker, Vol. i, introduction.

This large borrowing from foreign sources was not, fortunately, to suppress his originality, or undermine the value of his individual contribution to critical thought. Its distinctive and personal qualities impressed a large number of his contemporaries,—and more than one critic was glad to acknowledge him as master. Nor must we underrate the impetus toward the formation of sound critical doctrine that his writings gave the next century. From a number of standpoints, then, his *Essays* and *Prefaces* are documents of prime significance. As Mr. Ker puts it, “The fault of his prefaces is that they make one disappointed with his plays, when one comes to them after his criticisms.”⁴⁸ It is not, perhaps, too much to say that Dryden is destined to be a figure of increasing prominence in English literary criticism, as the critical study of that subject advances.

(To be continued.)

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⁴⁸Ker *op. cit.* vol. i, p. xx.